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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8384
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RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0814
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000285

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AIAG, NEA/ARP, NEA/RA; CAIRO FOR LINDA LOGAN
PASS TO USCENCOM FWD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [AMED](#) [CASC](#) [KSCA](#) [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [KU](#)

SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU SITREP No. 1 - H5N1 AVIAN FLU FOUND IN KUWAITI
BIRDS

11. (SBU) Summary: On 25 February, the Kuwaiti Minister of Health reported that 20 cases of bird flu had been detected in Kuwait. The date on which these cases actually surfaced is unknown. As of 27 February, the GOK has reported a total of 32 cases of the H5N1 virus in wild and domesticated birds. Thus far, there are no reports of the virus in commercial poultry and no reports of transmission to humans. Kuwait's initial response included: (1) Quarantining infected birds; (2) Confirming the cases through an independent lab in the UK; (3) Notifying WHO and liaison officers in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries; (4) Closing bird markets and zoo; (5) Restricting the movement of domesticated birds; (6) Opening a hotline to answer public health questions; and (7) Limited culling in affected areas. At this point, Kuwait's Director of Animal Health does not anticipate large-scale culling. At the borders, previous prohibitions on the importation of animals remain. As of COB February 27, no new restrictions have been imposed on Kuwait's borders with Iraq or Saudi Arabia. On 27 February, Post convened a meeting of its Avian Influenza Working Group. Econoff has scheduled a meeting with Kuwait's Public Health Director on 28 February to seek additional information and offer assistance. This will be immediately followed by a meeting of the Embassy's Emergency Action Committee. End Summary.

12. (U) On 25 February, Kuwaiti Health Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah announced that avian flu had been identified in 20 birds in Kuwait, most of them falcons. No cases of transmission to humans have been reported. The initial findings, which were made at a local lab at an undetermined date and time, were subsequently confirmed by the WHO-accredited Waybridge lab in the UK. Initial reports indicate that the majority of the infected birds were found in Wafra, Kuwait's main agricultural area, and the Kuwait Zoo. As of 1400 GMT on 27 February, Kuwaiti authorities reported the presence of the H5N1 virus in 32 birds. According to press reports, the new cases included 9 chickens and 3 turkeys in home pens.

13. (SBU) According to Dr. Farida Mulla Ahmad, Director of Animal Health at the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR), with whom the Embassy spoke on 26 and 27 February, thus far, no cases have been detected on commercial poultry farms. All cases have been identified in wild birds and/or domesticated birds kept as pets. Dr. Farida said no culling of commercial flocks is anticipated. PAAAFR suspects that the infection was spread to privately-owned domesticated birds by migrating birds. PAAAFR announced that it has taken precautionary measures and informed the World Health Organization (WHO) and liaison officers in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states about the infected birds, which were immediately quarantined. In the local press, the PAAAFR stated that it would "follow international measures to contain and eradicate the disease."

¶4. (SBU) The Health Minister announced that a national emergency plan to fight bird flu, has been activated. (Comment: Post has no reason to believe that any such plan truly exists. End comment.) The Government's initial steps have included closing bird markets and the zoo, restricting the movement of domesticated birds, and opening hotlines for public health information and the reporting of symptoms. (Note: Post was unsuccessful in numerous attempts to use the hotline which seems to be continuously busy.) Post has received no reports of actions taken to restrict movements of goods and/or persons across Kuwait's borders although local press reported on 27 February that the Ministry of Interior was considering measures to wash all vehicles coming into Kuwait across the Iraqi border. Post received confirmation from Kuwait Customs on the afternoon of February 27 that no such measures have been put into effect. (Note: Pre-existing GOK restrictions on the shipment of livestock remain. End note.)

¶5. (SBU) Press reporting also indicates that the GOK is analyzing blood samples taken from poultry farm workers and has begun administering them Tamiflu as a prophylaxis. The GOK indicates that this is a precautionary measure and there is no confirmation of transmission to humans.

¶6. (SBU) On 27 February, Post convened a meeting of its Avian Influenza Working Group (AIWG), which includes U.S. military health officials from local bases, to share information and discuss next steps. ARCENT medical officers, who have been in frequent contact with GOK officials, said they thought the GOK's response had been "adequate so far." On a scale of 1 to 10, they graded Kuwait's bio-security at a 7. They expressed confidence in Kuwait's surveillance program in poultry houses but said they knew little about what steps the GOK had taken with regard to domesticated birds. ARCENT officers said that until they received further

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assurances that Kuwait's commercial poultry was unaffected, ARCENT was suspending all purchases of eggs from Kuwaiti farms. (Note: Kuwait's poultry industry is relatively small and supports mostly domestic consumption. ARCENT, however, has contracts with local producers to provide Kuwaiti eggs to U.S. military units in Bahrain, Qatar, and Iraq. These shipments have been suspended.)

¶7. (SBU) ARCENT medical officers also expressed concern that Kuwait's fairly robust market in domesticated birds would move underground and contribute to the spread of the virus. (Note: It is common for Kuwaitis to keep birds as pets and to keep small numbers of chickens in their yards or on their roofs.) They speculated that contact between domesticated and migratory birds was the likely path by which the virus arrived in Kuwait. They added that more public surveillance was needed and that the GOK's response may need to include vaccinations and/or more widespread culling. U.S. military representatives at the AIWG expressed concern that plans to wash vehicles crossing the border, in addition to have limited to no effectiveness, would adversely impact military logistics movements between Iraq and Kuwait.

¶8. (SBU) Post will meet with the Kuwaiti Director of Public Health on 28 February to address outstanding concerns and offer assistance. Results of this meeting will be reported septel.

¶9. (SBU) Post has been in contact with the British Embassy to share information and coordinate efforts to support an effective Kuwaiti response.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: Although there has been a flurry of press releases since the cases were initially reported, it is not yet clear that the Kuwaitis have formed a unified chain of command, enabled the necessary coordination of activities among agencies, or embarked on a decisive plan of action. The celebration Kuwaiti national holidays on 25 and 26 February likely contributed to an actual response that does not appear to match the vigor of the GOK's initial public statements. End Comment.

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